

When a baby is stillborn, grandparents are hit with 'two lots of grief'

August 28 2019, by Jane Lockton, Clemence Due And Melissa Oxlad



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Six babies](#) are stillborn every day in Australia. This significant loss [affects parents](#) for years to come, often the rest of their lives. However, stillbirth also affects many others, including grandparents.

But until now, we have not heard the experiences of grandparents whose

grandchildren are stillborn. Their [grief](#) was rarely acknowledged and there are few supports tailored to them.

Our recently published [research](#) is the first in the world to specifically look at grandmothers' experience of [stillbirth](#) and the support they need.

In Australia, a baby [is defined as](#) stillborn when it dies in the womb from 20 weeks' gestation, or weighs more than 400 grams. Other countries have slightly different definitions.

[About 2,200](#) babies are stillborn each year here meaning stillbirth may be more common than many people think. And people [don't tend to talk](#) about this openly despite it leading to significant grief.

To explore grandparents' experience of stillbirth, we interviewed 14 grandmothers for our initial study, and a further 23 grandmothers and grandfathers since then.

Many grandparents were not aware stillbirth was a risk today. Most felt unprepared. Like parents, grandparents experienced grief like no other after their grandchild was stillborn.

Rose said: "The grief is always there, it never leaves you [...] I don't know why but sometimes it is still very raw."

Sally said: "I [would do] anything in my power to take it away, even if it meant, you know, something dreadful happening to me, I would have done it."

Grandparents also spoke of anticipating the arrival of their grandchild, and disbelief at their loss.

Donna said: "It was as bad as it could be and [...] I thought it just

couldn't be real, it couldn't be real."

Where grandparents lived a long way from their child, the loss was even more profound. Distance prevented them from holding their grandchild after birth, attending memorials, or helping their own children.

Iris said: "I still miss her now [...] When she was born and they had her in the hospital they would text me and say you know she's got hair like her daddy [...] and they would describe her and how beautiful she was, and that's all they have, you know [...] that's all I have really."

Grandparents said they wanted to hide their grief to protect their child from pain. This often made them isolated. Their relationships with [family members](#) often changed.

Mary said: "It's like two lots of grief [...] but I don't want it to sound like it's as bad as my daughter's loss. It's different, it's a different grief, because you're grieving the loss of a grandchild, and you're also grieving for your daughter and her loss and it's like yeah you've been kicked in the guts twice instead of once."

What grandparents wanted

Grandparents stressed the importance and ongoing value of being involved in "memory making" and spending time with their stillborn grandchild where possible.

Creating mementos, such as taking photos and making footprints and hand prints, were all important ways of expressing their grief. These mementos kept the baby "alive" in the family. They were also a way to ensure their own child knew the baby was loved and remembered.

Our research also identified better ways to support grandparents.

Grandparents said that if they knew more about stillbirth, they would be more confident in knowing how to help support their children. And if people were more aware of grandparents' grief, and acknowledged their loss, this would make it easier for them to get support themselves, and reduce feelings of isolation.

Our research also found families can recognize that grandparents grieve too, for both their child and grandchild. Grandparents can be encouraged to seek support from other family and friends. Families could also encourage grandparents to seek support from professionals if needed.

In hospitals, midwives can adopt some simple, time efficient strategies, with a big impact on grandparents. With parent consent, midwives could include grandparents in memory making activities.

By acknowledging the connection grandparents have to the baby, midwives can validate the grief that they experience. In recognizing the supportive role of grandparents, midwives can also provide early guidance about how best to support their child.

Hospitals can help by including grandparents in the education provided after stillbirth. This might include guidance about support for their child, or simply providing grandparents with written resources and guiding them to appropriate supports.

In time, development of peer support programs, where grandparents support others in similar situations, could help.

And, as a community, we can support [grandparents](#) the same way they support their own children. We can be there, listen and learn.

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